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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the role of Swahili in Tanzania looks at its elaboration as an indigenous language, involving both internal modification of the written language and the extension of its institutionalized domains of use. Because of its role as the lingua franca of the independence movement, Swahili became a vehicle for national political organization. Three other factors have played an important part in the success of Swahili as a symbol, including its ethnic neutrality as an African language; the fact that disparate groups can identify with it; and the personal and political power of Julius Nyerere, who exploited it as a supra-ethnic vehicle of communication, making the transition between loyalty based on traditional social structure and loyalty to the artificial entity of the modern state. Language policy followed in the wake of Nyerere's reactions to perceived crises rather than as a result of concerted government policy. Linguists and educators assumed Swahili would become the medium of secondary and higher education in the 1970s and 1980s, but this did not happen. As a result, the political status of Swahili plummeted. The language continues to have great communicative strength, however, and represents modernity to most people. English has high prestige but weak entrenchment in Tanzania, whereas Swahili is strongly entrenched. (MSE)

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THE ROLE OF VERNACULARIZATION IN TANZANIA : SWAHILI AS POLITICAL TOOL

Paper presented at the Sociolinguistics Symposium (7th, York, England, April 14-16, 1988).

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What follows is very much a preliminary sketch of the way in which, I submit, the recent history of the role of Swahili in Tanzania needs to be interpreted.

Cobarrubias (1983) is more than justified in pointing out that the ideological aspect of language-status planning is the most neglected area of language-planning (LP) in spite of the fact that ideologies underlie all forms of status-planning. The critical examination of a particular case of status-planning (and such planning is necessarily tied to corpus-planning) where the promotion of the language in question was overtly linked with the promotion of a particular political ideology is long overdue. (Recent useful discussions of the present status of Swahili have tended to focus more on the implications of its fluctuating role in the education system, e.g. Rubagumya 1986.)

What we are concerned with, in the case of Swahili in the post-colonial period, is 'vernacularization' - the 'elaboration of an indigenous language and its adoption as an official language' (Cobarrubias ibid : 66), 'elaboration'involving both internal modification of the written form of the language and the extension of its institutionalized domains of use.

It is important to try to go beyond broad categorizations such as 'vernacularization' (cf. 'assimilation', 'pluralism' etc.) for the reasons implied in Hymes' (1986) discussion of the danger of empirical inadequacy in universal frameworks - 'dichotomies and frameworks with few categories attract us because they offer order in a complex sphere, yet it is the hard truth that what goes on in given situations escapes such categorization'(ibid : 49). For one who has only recently come to the sociology of language scene, and LP in particular, this area of endeavour seems peculiarly rife with 'dichotomies and frameworks with few categories'. So I must say, at the outset, that I find dichotomous constructs such as 'diglossia' (and its trichotomous refinements) - and 'power and solidarity' - less than helpful in exploring the history of Swahili LP. Fasold (1984 Ch.2) uses Tanzania as one of his examples of multiple-language differentiation, all of which necessitate a refinement of the diglossia concept. The Tanzania situation is interpreted as one of 'double overlapping diglossia', with Swahili in a diglossic relationship with English (as H) on the one hand, and with the local vernaculars (as L) on the other. But this model, with Swahili playing a dual H/L role, masks the fact that for the vast majority of the population the L role of Swahili simply does not exist i.e. for them English has no communicative status (see Ervin-Tripp 1978 and Cobarrubias ibid : 49 on the distinction between individual communicative intent and conventional rules of language use - it is the latter that contribute to the communicative status of a language). English is acquired in Tanzania only through the education system, and recent monitoring of pupils' attainment suggests that functional competence in it is only achieved when the language has been the medium of a complete

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secondary school course (see Rubagumya ibid and Russell 1987 on the reasons for this). Rather less than 3% of primary-school leavers continue into secondary education (and primary school enrolment averaged across the country is accepted by educators and researchers as being around 70% of the primary-school age population (Carr-Hill 1984, B.Katigula p c). This figure, taken together with the knowledge that 'even though those Tanzanians who get higher education do so in English, their working language is in most cases Swahili' (Rubagumya ibid : 292) suggests that English in Tanzania has vanishingly low vitality for the bulk of the population, and the 'double overlapping diglossia' model[2] does not provide an adequate framework for understanding the recent role of Swahili in Tanzania.

As Le Page points out in his paper in this volume the term 'Swahili' means different things to different groups, and its use today extends far beyond the Swahili towns of the East African coast, which he likens to the Italian city-states. The reasons for Swahili spreading inland and then developing into a viable candidate for national language status in Tanzania are well-documented in Whiteley (1969) and Abdulaziz (1980). Its role of trade-route lingua franca during the nineteenth century expanded, during this century, to include functioning as the medium of basic education, as the medium of communication for supra-ethnic fraternal unions, anti-colonial movements and political associations. These functions culminated in the use of Swahili as a lingua franca by the nation-wide network of branches of the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) which worked for political independence and formed the first independent government in 1961. Swahili thus became, through proven use, a vehicle for national political organization. There appear to be at least three other significant factors in its success as a national totem i.e. as a symbol serving to remind citizens of their tasks and their relationship to the new nation.

Firstly, Swahili is an <u>African</u> language, and ethnically neutral. The speakers of the 'primary dialects' of the coast do not form an ethnic group of the sort sometimes referred to as 'tribe' and the term 'Swahili' as applied to them and their speech is, in essence, a cultural one. The speakers of other Bantu languages in Tanzania can mark their ethnicity by use of their vernacular (or 'ethnic language'); using Swahili fluently can convey various social messages, depending on the context of use, and these include : being well-travelled within East Africa, being familiar with urban life and having at least a modicum of formal education.

Secondly, quite disparate groups are able to identify with Swahili. The linguistic label 'Swahili' means to the Muslim literati of the East Coast something different (structurally and functionally) from what it does to second-language users who have acquired competence in it through the education system - and something different again to those who live in the remotest and largely monolingual areas and who have escaped the education system, and therefore Swahili, and have only minimal competence in it for occasional inter-ethnic communication. It is presumably because diverse groups within Tanzania can identify with the linguistic label 'Swahili' that it provided such a successful vehicle for the post-colonial rhetoric designed to mobilize the population behind the new government, in the early 1960's. If we look for just one parallel to the recent history of the relationship between the concept of 'Tanzania the nation' and its

national language we find it in France, where French has been 'a major symbol of national unity and one of the main instruments of achieving that unity' (see Tabouret-Keller in Proceedings of Standardization and Vernacularization of Literacy Workshop 1986).

A third factor in the success of Swahili as a national totem is one which should not be underestimated, although it does not fit easily into the frameworks familiar to practitioners of the sociology of language. This is the factor of individual influence. Examples of the various roles of individuals in the development and promotion of their language abound in the literature on the history of languages. What we have in the Tanzanian case is an example of an individual - the first President, Julius Nyerere, who took the only obvious candidate for national language status and used it as a political tool. In doing so he extended its domains of use and thereby enhanced its status both inside and outside Tanzania. Focussing on the part played by an individual is somewhat at odds with much of the LP literature, but I believe that to rely, as does Williams (1986) for example, on the concept of 'the state' in relation to LP policy - e.g. 'planning and policy relate to the state', 'the shared interests of language-planning and the state' - is to risk overlooking factors which influence not only policy-making but also popular attitudes towards the language in question. Acceptability in LP is crucially dependent upon positive public attitudes.

It is not very clear from Nyerere's published writings to what extent he was aware of the social stratification within pre-colonial Africa. His writings give a very idealised picture of traditional African society and do not overtly acknowledge that various groupings came together during the colonial period only because each of them was adversely affected by colonialism (Hartman 1987). So one cannot be sure how consciously Nyerere's promotion of Swahili in the 1960's and 1970's was an attempt to try to use the language as a sort of 'social cement' - to emphasize that which the various strata of society perceived that they had in common. It was certainly used to help minimize any possible disillusionment that might be felt by the peasants and urban workers when it became clear that political independence did not bring the end of social control or an immediate radical redistribution of wealth (see Wallerstein 1961 : 86). In the 1960's slogans abounded. The pre-Independence slogan 'Uhuru na Umoja!' (Freedom and Unity!') gave way to'Uhuru na Kazi!' ('Freedom and Work!') as Independence rhetoric developed into nation-building rhetoric. The Tanzanian experiment in one-party democracy depended heavily on Nyerere's own efforts, and not all of his colleagues shared his concern to promote constructive debate and widespread popular participation (Morrison 1976 : 22 - 3).

Nyerere was well-placed to know and exploit the value of Swahili as a supra-ethnic vehicle of communication, coming as he did from one of the smallest ethnolinguistic groups in the country, far from the East coast with its Swahili-speaking towns and far from the capital. Nyerere, during the two decades following the achievement of political independence functioned as 'national hero' in the way described by Wallerstein (ibid : 98 - 101) in his discussion of political hero-figures. That is, he was readily available, easily understood, symbol of the new nation, and also legitimized 'our country' by exhorting obedience to its norms out of

loyalty to himself. And he was also a role-model for second-language speakers of Swahili to identify with. He was - and is - acknowledged to be highly competent in the language, as his translations of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar and The Merchant of Venice, and his own political writings, testify. He is, above all, an accomplished and charismatic orator. The role of the skilled orator is an important one in preliterate societies and Tanzania, at Independence, was largely preliterate. Of necessity Nyerere found himself forging an immediately recognizable written prose style, modelled to some extent, and by necessity, on his oratorical style, and always tailored to his audience and current aims. Blommaert (ed)(1988), in his text analysis of Nyerere's 1967 position paper Elimu ya Kujitegemea (Education for Self-Reliance) notes, among other structural features, for example, the high incidence of the 1st Person plural pronoun 'sisi', and its possessive '-etu' in noun phrases such as 'nchi yetu Tanzania' ('our country Tanzania') and 'mipango yetu ya elimu' ('our plans for education'). Blommaert points out that in other written texts and in speeches Nyerere uses the 1st Person singular in relation to his ideas and intentions, and suggests that the frequency of the plural form in this text can be partly accounted for by the fact that it was intended as a working document, to be distributed to TANU officials and to be discussed at seminars; the use of the 1st Person plural pronoun is also a strategic device for signalling group membership and solidarity. In the following short extract from the 1967 policy booklet Ujamaa Vijijini (Socialism and Rural Development), which shows skilful use of various kinds of repetition as well as the '-etu' possessive pronoun noted above and the '-ao' 3rd Person plural possessive, Nyerere makes specific reference to the linguistic resources of Swahili. As part of his argument that traditional African society was based on an ethic of mutual dependence he refers to the way in which terms for kin relationships in Swahili are also used as terms of address and reference (for example a woman whose eldest son is Daudi can be called Mama Daudi, as a substitute for her given name) :

> 'Walijiona kwamba ni kitu kimoja; na lugha zao na vitendo vyao vilisisitiza umoja wa jamaa yao. Mahitaji ya lazima ya maisha yalikuwa ni 'chakula chetu','ardhi yetu', 'ng'ombe wetu'. Hata namna ya kuitana ilisisitiza umoja na uhusiano wa ujamaa. Binti Fulani au Bin Fulani; Mama Fulani au Baba Fulani .....'
>
> ('They regarded themselves as one; and their language and behaviour reflected the unity of their extended family. The basic necessities of life were 'our food', 'our land', 'our cattle'. Even their terms of address emphasized the oneness and mutual concern of the family. The daughter of so-and-so or the son of so-and-so; the mother of so-and-so or the father of so-and-so .....'

Slaughter (1985) has a pertinent comment to make in this connection : 'Political oratory based on oral modes ..... is highly formulaic ..... It has many of the qualities of a ritual - the exact content of the discourse being perhaps less important than the emotional effect .....'

In the period immediately following the achievement of political Independence language policy in Tanzania followed in the wake of the President's reactions to perceived crises, rather than as a result of

concerted government policy. Hartman (1987) refers to the Presidency at that time as 'a state within the state'. The 1961 Republican constitution gave the President the power to act unilaterally, and although he did not very often exercise this power the occasions when he did so reveal themselves as responses to crises (and these help to account for the extreme policy-changes which the country has experienced). These were both external and internal in origin - the growth of the 'Wabenzi' (capitalists, i.e. the Mercedes-Benz-driving class), the army mutiny, the University student strikes, coups in West Africa. Hartman (ibid) gives several examples of responses to crises at that time. One of these was the publication of the Arusha Declaration in 1967. This was very much a product of Nyerere's own thinking, and was an ideological statement of egalitarian intent. Its major principles involved a determination to outlaw capitalism, to promote self-reliance, the work ethic and so on. The most important aspect, from the point of view of language policy, was the insistence that decision-making was to take place at every level of political organization, from TANU Central Committee through regional and village committees to the ten-family cells. Communication between the various levels would be through Swahili. The overhaul of the education system at about this time was designed to turn an inherited elitist system into one which more closely reflected a society with an agriculture-based economy committed to egalitarian development. One of the most revolutionary aspects of the 'Education for Self-Reliance' policy was the creation of a cycle of primary education designed to be complete in itself. This was linked to a deliberate policy of keeping the secondary sector small in order to avoid over-production of secondary school leavers for whom there would be insufficient 'white collar' employment. The complete Swahiliization of the medium of education throughout the primary school course was a major factor in the successful promotion of Swahili during the late 1960's and early 70's. What has seemed particularly anomalous is that, as pointed out by King (1984), for five years of the primary school course all children are required to study English, in which only that small minority who transfer to secondary education will ever become competent. This anomaly was heightened, during the late 1960's, by a number of policy statements on education (e.g. in the Second Five Year Plan for 1969 - 74) which made it clear that the linguistic gulf between those people educated through Swahili only (i.e. primary school leavers and primary teachers) and the minority educated through English was seen in government circles as at odds with the egalitarian 'Ujamaa' ('co-operative living' or 'African Socialism') policy. The Second Five Year Plan document pointed out that teaching through the medium of English provided an alien atmosphere for post-primary education, remote from the problems of the mass of the people; it referred to the expected localization of secondary school teaching personnel which would be completed by 1977, and which would facilitate a gradual transition to the replacement of English-medium by Swahili-medium teaching. The highly successful mass literacy campaign initiated in 1969 and implemented during the 1970's, and the Swahiliization of government administration have also contributed to the image of a successful national language policy.

There is ample evidence from a number of published and unpublished papers (e.g. Khamisi 1980, Mhina 1977, Maina 1977 a and b, Mlama and Matteru 1977, Mohamed 1975, Trappes-Lomax and Besha et al 1980, Hill 1980)

that linguists and educationists - including university staff - were working on the assumption, during the late 1970's and early 1980's, that secondary and higher education would be Swahiliized, starting with the secondary schools in the mid 1980's. The government decision not to extend Swahili-medium to secondary and tertiary education has clearly disappointed many educationalists and language-planners (who for more than a decade have concentrated their efforts on lexicographical and technical terminology work). Occasional statements in ministers' speeches in 1983 and 1984 (Hikmany 1985, Katigula interview 20.5.85) were finally followed by a published statement in the Mfumo wa Elimu Tanzania - the government policy document setting out its plans to implement the recommendations of the 1982 Presidential Commission on Education. It is notable that the Commission's strong plea for the replacement of English-medium by Swahili at secondary level does not find a place in the plans for implementation. The fact that the English version states (Mfumo 3.10) 'English will be the medium of education at post-primary levels' whereas the more widely distributed Swahili version gives only the ambiguous 'Both English and Kiswahili will be used as media of education' (my translation) is an indication of the sensitivity of this LP issue. A number of writers (including Rubagumya ibid, King ibid, Mlama and Matteru ibid, Blommaert and Gysels 1987) have noted the equivocal nature of official attitudes towards English in the recent past. The status of English plummetted during the period of the most active promotion of Swahili, during the 1960's and early 70's, yet it is clear that education policy-makers equate successful secondary and higher education with learning through the medium of English. The implications of the linguistic gulf between secondary school leavers and those (the vast majority) educated entirely through Swahili have become unimportant since the recent ideological shift towards a less doctrinaire stance on 'development'.

The demise of Swahili as political cookie-cutter in Tanzania was foreseen by Whiteley (1971) who suggested that, as the achievement of political independence recedes into the past, the role of Swahili in that achievement is likely to cease to validate its continuing pre-eminence in society. The context of this prediction suggests that by 'pre-eminence in society' Whiteley was thinking of Swahili functioning in a greatly extended range of technical fields and as the teaching-medium progressively further up the education system. But the thrust of development in post-colonial Tanzania, initiated by the personal crusade of its charismatic first president, has been 'from the grass roots up', with emphasis on improved agricultural practices and basic amenities for the peasants rather than large-scale importation of industrial technology, and on adult literacy and (attempted) universal primary education rather than the expansion of secondary education.

For the mass of the people development in these terms has meant that Swahili has great communicative strength. Forced to use the 'power and solidarity' metaphor I would have to suggest that, for most people, Swahili has both. The power may have been covert in the years immediately preceding Independence, when overt power was in the hands of English-speakers, but it was power nontheless. And for most people power is still associated with the use of Swahili. And so is modernity (which is often linked, in the LP literature, with the use of a European language).

Modernity is open to a variety of interpretations. For the mass of the Tanzanian population (largely rural) it means literacy, accessible primary education, piped water, well-stocked village dispensaries, adequate provision of basic foodstuffs, comprehensible advice on how to improve cash crops ..... All the associated communicative events are carried on in Swahili.

The present de facto role of Swahili in Tanzania vis a vis English is very reminiscent of that of Haitian Creole in relation to French in Haiti, because as Cobarrubias (ibid : 56) points out, a language (e.g. French, English) may have high prestige but weak entrenchment relative to a particular speech community. English has high prestige in Tanzania, but very weak entrenchment; Swahili is very strongly entrenched .

In attempting to interpret the communicative strength of Swahili 'from the inside', to try to match the outsider-linguist's perceptions of the situation to those of insiders, in so far as this is possible, it is necessary to reiterate the importance of the link made above between the status of Swahili and Tanzania's particular hero-leader of the recent past, Julius Nyerere. Wallerstein (ibid : 99) has pointed out the importance of such a figure for making the transition between loyalty based on traditional social structure and loyalty to the artificial entity of the modern state, a relatively new basis for authority in Africa; 'the citizens can feel an affection for the hero which they may not have at first for the nation. Insofar as the hero works in tandem with a party structure, he provides a very powerful mechanism for integration of the state'. Even the most cursory glance at the state of the political art in sub-Saharan Africa reveals Tanzania's high degree of one-party political integration and stability; this is inextricably linked with the communicative functions of Swahili in society.

In the light of the above brief discussion, it very much looks as though the present policy-makers responsible for language-planning in education may be trying to swim against the tide.[3]

NOTES

1 Fasold (ibid : 45) refers to Tanzania as 'the former British colony ...' In fact, after World War I it was a League of Nations mandated territory administered by Britain, and after World War II a United Nations trusteeship, similarly administered. I point this out not through pedantry but to offer a <u>partial</u> explanation for the use of English being much less widespread in public life among educated Tanzanians than it is in, say, neighbouring Kenya - which <u>was</u> a British colony. The presence and influence of a relatively large number of (officially encouraged) English-speaking settlers over half a century in Kenya cannot be ignored as <u>one</u> of the factors contributing to the pervasiveness of English in public life there. (On another level, that of educational policy for the indigenous population, it mattered much less what the international status of a British-administered country was.)

2 One may also note that this model fudges the difference between the two types of relationship that Swahili is said to be involved in. 96% of Tanzania's languages are classified, like Swahili, as Bantu, and a speaker switching between her Bantu language (or, between one of the several Bantu tongues she regularly uses) and Swahili can be conceptualised as operating at different points along a sliding scale of 'Bantuness'. Switching from Swahili to English usually necessitates a much greater communicative effort, except in particular, well-defined and restricted contexts, such as academic discussion through Swahili during which English technical terms are used.

3 I have not mentioned the question of financial resources in connection with a Swahili-medium policy for secondary and higher education. There is little doubt that Tanzanian financial resources and the present infrastructure on which the education system depends would be insufficient for the successful implementation of such a policy. But it should be noted that, in the past, policy has not waited upon internal resources e.g. the mass literacy campaign and the expansion of primary education were both made possible by overseas aid (notably from Scandinavia).

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